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# Nicaraguan Gay and Lesbian Rights and the Sex of Post-Sandinismo

Alyssa Cymene Howe

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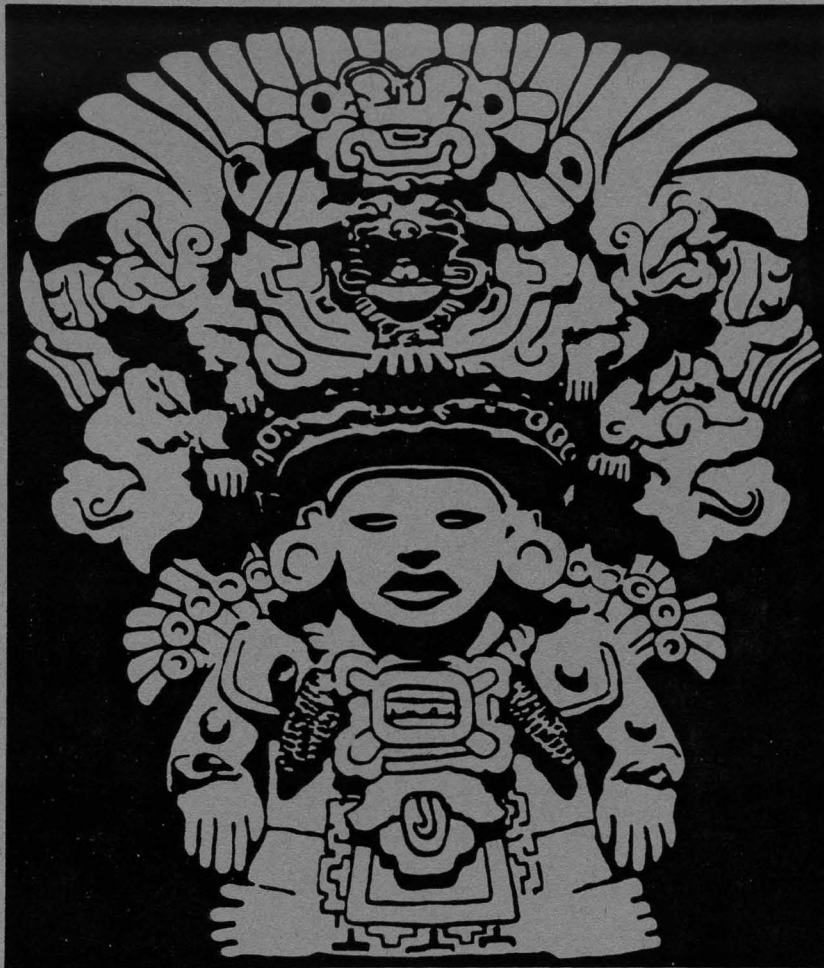
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Nicaraguan Gay and Lesbian Rights and the  
Sex of Post-Sandinismo

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Nicaraguan Gay and Lesbian Rights and the  
Sex of Post-Sandinismo

by

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Personally, I feel that it is very important to be involved in the problems of the society in which I live. I could not just live my life outside of what is taking place around me. As a woman, I have felt the need to involve myself closely with the organized work of other women. As a lesbian, I feel that it is even more important that I play an active role regarding questions of feminism and the reality of my country and of Nicaraguan women. -Hazel Fonseca <sup>1</sup>

## **introduction**

Struggles of liberation take many forms, are born from many terrains, and conceived by many minds. Historical circumstance engenders the shape revolutions will take as much as it engenders the acts revolutionaries will carry out. In the history of Nicaragua myriad forces have converged to create a state calling out for change; a call which has been answered in various forms. My purpose here is to illustrate the multiple factors which informed lesbian rights movements in Nicaragua in the late 1980s. I take as my starting point the notion that historical context, and ideologies which shape historical context, both served to facilitate and foreclose the possibilities available to lesbian organizing. I will begin by sketching a brief history of Nicaragua in order to understand the legacy against which the Frente Sandinista de Liberación Nacional articulated its material and ideological positions; positions which later became embodied in the mythical making of Sandino. From these ideological foundations, I will trace the material changes the FSLN implemented during its tenure of rule. Utilizing the refrain of women's liberation as a window, I will examine the formation of a gay and lesbian rights agenda. In discussing lesbian rights organizations and the conservative backlash they continue to endure, I hope to weave ideological tropes within substantive, political change. Throughout, I will argue that while the policies and proclivities of Sandinismo often lent strength to nascent identity movements, the legacy of Sandinismo also obscured possibilities for these same movements. Liberation is, after all, never a simple task.

## **the long shadow of colonialism**

As the empire of Spain began to disintegrate, Nicaragua began the long struggle for sovereignty. The state proclaimed independence in 1821, which was obliterated in 1856 by the arrival of William Walker. Often referred to as "a white supremacist,"<sup>2</sup> Walker trekked to the

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<sup>1</sup> Hazel Fonseca, "Interview with Nicaraguan Feminist Leader Hazel Fonseca," cited from: <http://ladb.unm.edu/cgi-bin/SFgate?conv...fprojects%252farchive%252fpub17315> (1992), KUNM Radio broadcast. Accessed: October 12, 1998.

<sup>2</sup> Les W. Field, "Constructing Local Identities in a Revolutionary Nation: The Cultural Politics of the Artisan Class in Nicaragua, 1979-90," *American Ethnologist* 22, no. 4 (1999): 789.

fledgling state of Nicaragua from his origins in the US, reinstated slavery, and proclaimed himself president of the Republic. Though Walker was ousted after two years of reign, his tenure in office was recognized by the US government who saw him as a valuable component for future US hegemony in the region. The lust for raw materials saw the influx of US-based fruit, mining, and timber companies, and the US Marines were sent to protect these interests by occupying the country from 1909-1934. Nicaragua's ruling classes were, for the most part, pleased with the US occupation. Nicaraguan peasants, however, were not. From their ranks rose the now infamous Augusto César Sandino. Sandino rallied supporters amongst liberals and peasants by proclaiming that, "The liberty and sovereignty of a people are not matters for discussion...They are to be defended with arms."<sup>3</sup> His refusal to compromise on the issue of national sovereignty lead Sandino to organize a peasant army which ultimately vanquished the US Marines after years of *guerrilla* warfare. The Marines' bid to defeat what they called "Sandino's crazy little army" failed and in 1934 the Marines retreated to the US. In their stead, they left the *Guardia Nacional* (National Guard). The National Guard, a private army of Nicaraguans under US orders to dispense with Sandino's army once and for all, was headed by US-appointed puppet leader Anastasio Somoza. Somoza's first act after instating his oligarchic government and declaring himself president was to murder Sandino. The Somoza dynasty would rule Nicaragua for almost half a century in the service of Somocista and US interests. In July 1979, after almost twenty years in the making, the people's revolution lead by the Frente Sandinista de Liberación Nacional (FSLN) overthrew the dictatorial regime.

The FSLN was formed in 1961 with the aim of usurping Somoza and the US interests that supported him. After years of struggle against Somoza and the National Guard, the FSLN marched triumphantly into Managua in July 1979, to begin their implementation of social and political transformations. A year later, the Reagan administration, under the auspices of preventing "communism" in the US's "back yard," instructed the CIA to carry out a secret war against the Sandinistas by employing disgruntled former members of the National Guard. The counterrevolutionaries or "Contras," funded covertly by the US government, operated out of military camps in Honduras. Their campaign of "low intensity warfare" aimed to destabilize the revolutionary government by attacking "soft targets" such as schools, health centers, and

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<sup>3</sup> Helen Collinson, ed. *Women and Revolution in Nicaragua* (London: Zed, 1990), 4.

agricultural co-operatives sponsored by the FSLN. The Contras launched a propaganda campaign in an attempt to strengthen civilian opposition. Each of these tactics had the opposite effect: popular support for the FSLN grew across much of the country. However, in 1985 a full-scale trade embargo which cut Nicaragua's sugar exports to the US, would begin to dissolve the broad base of support for the FSLN.

The externally dependent economy of Nicaragua was strangled by the economic austerity measures implemented by the US. Social programs which had enjoyed wide success and popularity suffered under the economic devastation. Scarce material resources were funneled into the military campaign in order to fend off the increasingly virulent attacks by the Contras.<sup>4</sup> After eight years of war, the revolutionary government was in dire economic straits; normalizing economic relations with the US and ending the war were imperative for the upcoming, second general election.<sup>5</sup>

Nicaragua attempted to recover, economically and psychologically, from years of war. Humanitarian aid from the US trickled into the country but Contra attacks continued, though now more sporadically. The US and some European nations continued to fund right wing opposition parties in Nicaragua until 1990, when the Sandinistas were defeated at the polls by the US-backed party UNO (Unión Nacional de Oposición). US imperialism in Nicaragua continues to threaten attempts at national sovereignty. While economic embargo, war and political intervention constitute the assaults from the North, one character continues to personify US hegemony: the now defunct dictator, Anastasio Somoza. All that Somoza stood for was precisely that which the FSLN struggled against; and it was in contradistinction to Somoza that a revolutionary idol would be born. The dialectic between oppression and liberation served to congeal revolutionary ideals into action. This same dialectic would later come to inform identity based rights movements in search of similar goals for social change.

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<sup>4</sup> The neighboring countries of Mexico, Venezuela, Colombia, Panama and Costa Rica, in support of Nicaragua, formed the "Contradora Group" in order to devise a peace plan. Their concerns were with the destabilization of the region engendered by conflicts and endemic to US hegemony and intervention. The Esquipulas Peace Accord was signed in August 1987, and signaled the military and diplomatic defeat of the Contras. However, Contra funding continued, as did their attacks. In 1988 Contra leaders and FSLN representatives agreed to sign the Sapoa Accord, yet another attempt to relieve the pressures from the North.

<sup>5</sup> The Summit of Central American Presidents was postponed until the 1988 US elections, emphasizing again the pervasive effect of US policy on Central American issues.



## **building sandino**

History has proven that in order to develop a revolution, a relatively coherent “voice of the people” must be created. An ideology, a set of symbols, and material goals must be extant before the people can be asked to lay down their lives. However, values that are attached to revolutions are dependent on the particular, specific circumstances of each nation. Carlos Fonseca, one of the three founders of the FSLN, realized this need to create a coherent project for revolution and found, in Sandino, a perfect man to be made into myth; a symbol to embody an ideology. In an analysis of FSLN literature of the early 1970s, Steven Palmer suggests that Fonseca’s rendering of Sandino as an icon of the revolution served to inform all subsequent ideological tropes of what would become Sandinismo. Fonseca, an “organic intellectual” of the Gramscian ilk, rather than a sophisticated Marxist theorist, constructed an image of Sandino that would serve to provide “leadership, meaning and motivation for a nation undergoing a revolutionary process.”<sup>6</sup> However, the making of Sandino, the myth, was no easy task. By the time Fonseca began the process of unearthing the symbolics of Sandino, the peasant revolutionary “had all but disappeared from the historical consciousness of Nicaraguans, especially the younger generation.”<sup>7</sup> Sandino’s image had been utilized in the 1940s by student activists after an obvious electoral fraud by Somoza. However, Sandino had never served as a symbol having any coherent ideology. Sandino’s potential for symbolic status was good, but uneven. He had organized a guerrilla army, refused to observe a cease-fire, ousted the US Marines, and authored communiqués to the US and the world. Sandino’s messages were consistent in their virulent anti-imperialism, though the targets of his antipathy were constantly shifting. Sandino’s nationalism, certainly, was mythical.<sup>8</sup>

Sandino’s rejection of orthodox Marxism would be mirrored by the FSLN as the doctrine of the PSN (Partido Socialista Nicaragüense) was reformulated to reflect nationalist roots. This breach with orthodoxy would, in turn, provide “the autonomy necessary to adapt a nationalist, nonsectarian, flexible ideology and strategy.”<sup>9</sup> The tensions between nationalist ideology and a strict Marxist interpretation fostered an important dynamic tension within the FSLN which

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<sup>6</sup> Steven Palmer, “Carlos Fonseca and the Construction of Sandinismo in Nicaragua,” *Latin American Research Review* 23.1 (1988), 92.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 94.

<sup>8</sup> Indeed, Sandino’s would-be comrades in the Third International ex-communicated him from their proceedings due to his distinctly nationalist stance, which reeked to them of “false consciousness”.

facilitated an ongoing analysis of the question of which ideologies would best serve the revolutionary cause. Later, in the development of identity-based rights movements, these questions of “false consciousness,” alongside a commitment to social change, would again bring ideological tensions and their productive potential to the fore. Questions concerning gender and sexuality-based oppression(s) were juxtaposed against those of class-based inequalities in a fashion reminiscent of Marx and Engels’ struggles with “the woman question”. The interplay amongst and between differing forms of oppression were, however, always rendered through the shadow of Sandinismo and the construction of Sandino’s mythos.

Fonseca labored over Sandino’s image for 16 years and portrayed him as embodying a naïve stage of anti-imperialist consciousness. Sandino’s name appeared in the FSLN ephemera alongside ‘Che’ and ‘Zapata’. Ernesto Che Guevara’s *foco*, a small, rural army with a clear ideology but no political party, served as a strategic model akin to Sandino’s peasant army. Sandino’s time in Mexico was temporally tied to Zapata’s uprising, though no apparent contact was ever made between Sandino and Zapata. Fonseca was able to smooth over contradictions in order to paint a symbolic national narrative onto the face of Sandino. He became not merely an object-hero, but a blueprint for a historical patrimony. Sandino was juxtaposed against Somoza by positing nationalism against dependency. The dialectics set up between Sandino and Somoza relayed that only through collective action could Sandino be avenged. As the FSLN concretized its connection to the radical sector of the Catholic Church, Sandino was portrayed as a Christ-like figure, a martyr who had died for the collective good.<sup>10</sup> Sandino lived on in the popular imagination as both “bandit-hero” and “Padre de la Patria”. He was configured not as a static historical figure but as embodying a “path” or “trajectory” which the FSLN would follow. Sandino’s vision, as offering a “path” as well as a symbol, was necessary, according to Fonseca, because imperialism was now more complex. Hence, the struggle for sovereignty required a more sophisticated ideological superstructure; one which could address the vagaries of imperialist intervention. What was needed was “the simultaneous deployment of a reinterpreted history of Sandino and a ‘metahistory’ of Nicaragua that complement[ed] one another.”<sup>11</sup> In this fashion, Sandino’s struggle, and Fonseca’s rendering, were indivisible from the FSLN. The

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<sup>9</sup> Ibid., 95.

<sup>10</sup> Margaret Randall, *Christians in the Nicaraguan Revolution* (Vancouver: New Star, 1983).

<sup>11</sup> Palmer, *Carlos Fonseca*, 101.

FSLN was, rather, a culmination of these ideals. Fonseca penned the FSLN oath and handbook; his influence in constructing the foundation of the FSLN should not be understated.

Fonseca's construction of Sandino reflects many aspects of FSLN ideology which would be put into practice in the reformatations which the revolutionary government was able to institute. The socialist-inspired changes implemented by the FSLN will be quite apparent in the discussion to follow. However, alongside socialist aspirations, the building of Sandinismo embraced a tripartite refrain of nationalism, Catholicism and a mediated *machismo*. Before expanding on the FSLN reforms between the years 1979 and 1990, I will introduce these three refrains, later circling back to how these refrains manifested themselves in the discourses surrounding women's and gay and lesbian rights. The phenomena of nationalism, Catholicism, and *machismo*, congealed in the figure of Sandino, are fundamental to understanding how the revolutionary government both facilitated, and limited, the formation of identity-based rights movements, especially those of women and gays and lesbians, in Nicaragua.

The nationalist leanings of Sandinismo are hardly veiled in the discourses put forth by the FSLN. Benedict Anderson's discussion of nationalist origins has lent much to the understanding of how and why nationalism appeared on the global scene when it did. He suggests that nationalism is a cultural artifact of a particular kind, which has come into being and changed over time. Anderson describes the "imagined community" of the nation as one which engenders deep attachments in the form of a "horizontal comradeship" for which people "are willing, not so much to kill, as to die for."<sup>12</sup> He claims that the sense of peoplehood which arises from nationalism is possible only when members of the nation "imagine" themselves connected, across space and time, to a greater whole. The nation is, then, "imagined" inasmuch as there are no innate, "natural" ties that bind, but rather, a coherent conceptual schema understood to unite disparate members into the national whole. The nation has limited, finite, if elastic, boundaries. The nation is a sovereign entity, which exists amongst pluralism, and therefore must define itself as distinct and autonomous. The nation is a community for which people are willing to sacrifice. Sandino certainly personified this nationalist spirit since he retaliated against imperialism in a bid for sovereignty and united the peasant nation against the forces of domination. His sacrifice, at the hands of Somoza, took on mythical proportions. While Anderson's formulation of

nationalism has been widely heralded, it too has been critiqued for placing inordinate emphasis on the political aspects of nation building.<sup>13</sup> Certainly in Nicaragua, nation building entailed myriad “cultural” aspects; political nationalism did not stand alone.

Nationalist sacrifice is reminiscent of another cultural formation: Christianity. Indeed, Anderson places the origins of nationalism at that time in history when bibles became prolific and commoners were able to individually glean their wisdom. While it would be impossible to address the vicissitudes of Church doctrine in its many manifestations, suffice it to say that Christ’s sacrifice has long been coupled with sacrifices demanded of the poor and suffering, who are expected to pin their hopes on a more sweet hereafter. While the FSLN found critical allies in the liberation theologians who informed the revolutionary project, the fundamental aspects of Catholicism, with their long historical roots, should not be discounted.

The results of the Second Vatican Council and the interpretations of the Medellín conference of Latin American bishops advocated that the poor struggle against tyranny, rather than await salvation in heaven. Scriptures which advocated a communal sensibility, derived from Christ’s teachings, were melded with Marxist tenets to become what would be known as liberation theology.<sup>14</sup> This constituted a break with the conservative Church which the FSLN was quick to embrace. However, the legacy of the Church, even in its radical form, must be considered in an examination of how these dynamics played out within the revolutionary regime. Abstinence and a focus on reproductive sex, sins and their confession, the New Testament’s notion of turning the other cheek, and the Old Testament’s eye for an eye, guilt and salvation, all comprise the Catholic dialectic which continued to exercise influence in the radical church. In strategizing a Catholic component of the revolution, the FSLN risked associations with principles which ante-dated the more radical readings conceived by liberation theologians. While the Catholicism of Medellín derivation is markedly different from more oppressive forms, each advocates biblical and church doctrine, albeit in distinct ways. The marriage of Catholicism and socialist aspirations is a distinct aspect of Nicaragua’s revolutionary project,<sup>15</sup> one that was

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<sup>12</sup> Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London: Verso, 1991 [1983]), 7.

<sup>13</sup> See Partha Chatterjee, *The Nation and Its Fragments: Colonial and Postcolonial Histories* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993).

<sup>14</sup> Randall, *Christians and Roger Lancaster, Thanks to God and the Revolution: Popular Religion and Class Consciousness in the New Nicaragua* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988).

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*

symbolically portrayed in the figure of Sandino. The construction of Sandino and the ideology he embodied was compared to Christ; and his sacrifice and martyrdom dovetailed with the nationalist project. The question which remains is how the adoption of Catholicism, even in a revolutionary form, came to inform the discourse of rights for women and gays and lesbians. In addition to Catholic principles, identity based rights movements would have to reckon with another cultural formation: *machismo*.

Searching for the roots of *machismo*, Mercedes Olivera, along with other Nicaraguan feminists, has applied a socialist-feminist approach to address the origins of patriarchy and women's economic domination. In *Nicaragua: El poder de las mujeres* (1992) she finds that the eighteenth century's decimation of indigenous populations, Spanish male colonial presence, and economic imperatives all served to concretize patriarchy and *machismo*. Olivera writes that, "[Male] sexual license created a cultural form, a model of socially acceptable conduct that greatly subordinated women. This was fundamentally due to the utilization of women as reproducers of the [greatly diminished] workforce, with the consequent devalorization of female sexuality."<sup>16</sup> Whether or not one agrees with Olivera's analysis, *machismo* as either fact or fiction has enjoyed a central place in the popular imagination of Nicaragua. In Roger Lancaster's ethnography, *Life is Hard* (1992), one of the author's informants, Jaime, summarizes the ideal *macho* as "someone who could drink, fight, gamble, and have a large number of sexual conquests."<sup>17</sup> Following theories of social construction, Roger Lancaster elaborates that *machismo* names a "system of manliness" which provides certain privileges and prerogatives to men. As a system, rather than a "natural" condition of males, he concludes that *machismo* is a set of values which generates ideas; *machismo* is a site of productive power, a political economy of the body which simultaneously structures relations of power between men and women, and men and men.<sup>18</sup> While common conceptions of *machismo* entail the beating of wives, fathering many children in multiple households, abandoning compañeras and children, gambling and drinking,<sup>19</sup> Lancaster is correct to point out the political economy of these conceptions. Likewise, in a parallel study of Mexican *machismo*, Matthew Gutmann calls for a "new analysis of masculinity and modernity"

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<sup>16</sup> Mercedes Olivera, et al., eds., *Nicaragua: El poder de las mujeres* (Managua: Cezontle, 1992), 66-68.

<sup>17</sup> Roger N. Lancaster, *Life is Hard: Machismo, Danger, and the Intimacy of Power in Nicaragua* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992), 175.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 278-281.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 245.

especially in regard to the nurturance of fatherhood.<sup>20</sup> He finds that the concept of *machismo* often serves as a shorthand for all negative male stereotypes,<sup>21</sup> a view that effectively collapses routes of analysis and change. Gutmann suggests that gender identity is a complex of factors, but also advocates that social scientists be mindful of the pessimistic stance that “nothing ever does change,”<sup>22</sup> especially between men and women. The multiple factors which constitute the popular understanding of *machismo* are dynamic and up for interpretation. *Machismo*, according to Lancaster, does appear to produce a set of privileges, power relations and discourses within its folds. In Carlos Fonseca’s portrait of Sandino there was no trace of a hard-drinking philanderer, a “typical” macho. However, neither was Sandino represented as a “family man”. That he was unburdened by a compañera and children, resonates with what Lancaster identifies as the pervasive Nicaraguan male habit of abandoning compañeras and children. As a “bandit hero” Sandino is portrayed as a socialist cowboy extraordinaire, spending his nights in the jungle to avenge imperialism. He was, as Fonseca has told it, a lone man in search of justice. While the FSLN actively and consciously sought to create a “new man” through the revolution, one who did not behave in a *machista* manner, it is clear that the figure of Sandino retained some of the romantic, un-tethered individualism that lies at the crux of *machismo*.

The FSLN’s emphasis on a single, historical figure is unique in the history of Marxist revolutions.<sup>23</sup> Nationalist sentiments which here are evoked by Sandino, are often understood as a prop of the bourgeoisie, a “false consciousness” in the first instance. The Church, in the form of liberation theology, has figured heavily in many Latin American revolutionary projects, though religion, the “opiate of the masses” also falls outside the scope of orthodox Marxism.<sup>24</sup> Certainly *machismo*, as a system of hierarchical domination lies outside the egalitarian principles at the center of Marxism. However, this tension between orthodoxy and a more autonomous hybrid invigorated FSLN ideology. The Nicaraguan form of socialism certainly facilitated many revolutionary goals. What remains to be assessed is how this particular hybrid of ideologies

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<sup>20</sup> Matthew C. Gutmann, *The Meanings of Macho: Being a Man in Mexico City* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996), 2.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 26.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 22.

<sup>23</sup> Ernesto “Che” Guevara certainly served as an inspiration for the Cuban and later, Nicaraguan revolutions. However, I distinguish here between the patently “historical” figure of Sandino, long gone, and Che whose work occurred during the actual revolutionary period in Cuba.

inspired, or foreclosed, the possibility of identity-based movements. Understanding the “making of Sandino” illustrates the ways in which his image, and his “path,” were not so much innate as they were an artful re-construction. Understanding the “making of Sandino” highlights the constructed nature of ideology and the material goals it proposes. In this, understanding the “making of Sandino” illustrates how the FSLN would address the twin projects of feminism and gay and lesbian rights. Framing Sandino, the myth, as a discursive construct rather than a simple “truth” is not meant to detract from the very real accomplishments Sandino and the FSLN were able to realize. It is, rather, meant to evoke two points. First, the portrait of Sandino serves as a lucid encapsulation of many of the ideological and strategic tenets that the FSLN would embrace. Secondly, the mythical making of Sandino serves as a foil for a future figure who would *not* be made mythical. A later character in the history of the FSLN might have taken on the epic proportions of Sandino, that is, were she not a woman, and a lesbian. But first, there is a revolution to be had.

### **the triumph**

During the reign of Somoza, members of the opposition were summarily “disappeared,” tortured and killed. Wealth and land was maintained in the hands of a few: those allied with Somoza and his National Guard. While the entire rural populace was susceptible to the whims of the regime, women in particular bore the brunt of Somocismo. The following are just some of the major changes the FSLN was able to implement for women’s more egalitarian inclusion in the national project.

During the 45-year reign of Somoza, peasant women lived at the bottom of a hierarchical system of exploitation. While 40% of coffee pickers were women, their economic contribution was invisible in *hacienda* payrolls because male “heads of households” received payment for the work done by their wives and daughters. Women’s work was compensated at half the rate paid to men and women’s remuneration was, literally, paid to men. Only men were recognized as property owners and only men had any sort of tenants’ rights. While these unequal configurations are familiar to many Latin American nations at the time, in the case of Nicaragua the unequal distribution of goods and access to power were directly associated with Somocismo.

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<sup>24</sup> See Lancaster, *Thanks to God* for an in-depth discussion of how Marx’s “opiate of the masses” has often been misinterpreted as a diatribe against religiosity. Instead, Lancaster suggests that Marx’s rigorous disavowal of religion was both a reaction to his historical position, and a desire to elaborate on the Hegelian split between “spirit” and “material”.

Hence, they became arenas in need of social change in accord with the FSLN's mission to undo years of tyrannical rule.

The Sandinistas' Agrarian Reform and Cooperative laws (1981) were the first in Latin America to recognize women's equal rights with men in regard to wages, a profound change from the Somoza years. Women were offered access to land and the FSLN's organization of cooperatives made women landowners and co-op members in their own right, with or without a male head of household present.<sup>25</sup> However, the implementation of agrarian reform was riddled with setbacks, as rural women often remained uninformed about their rights and privileges under the law. Though the 1980 National Literacy Crusade taught almost half a million Nicaraguans to read and write, lowering illiteracy from 50% to 13%, rural women were nevertheless ignorant of their full possibilities under agrarian reform.

Shifts in the division of labor did occur, primarily as resistance against the Contras rallied more and more men to the front lines. Much like the "Rosie the Riveter" phenomenon during World War II in the US, Nicaraguan women were shuttled into more skilled, permanent employment positions outside of the home. In rural settings, the division of labor within the home underwent changes as men attempted to subscribe to "new man" ideals by committing to one woman and helping with household chores. The FSLN prioritized poor women living in the countryside in order to boost agricultural production in the mid-1980's. To counteract Somocismo in the country, the revolutionary government invigorated rural infrastructure with new housing, health posts, public transportation, schools, electricity, safe water, vaccination campaigns, and the distribution of basic foods through government channels.<sup>26</sup> Many cooperatives took up "traditional" forms of women's work, such as sewing, food processing, etc., which offered women an opportunity to work outside of the domestic sphere and to create a sense of solidarity with other women. A study by the Universidad Centro Americana (UCA) found that both rural and urban women benefited from the "women's collective" model. Revivifying the rural sectors of the country was imperative to the FSLN, not only for the production of foodstuffs, but to slow the rampant migrations to the urban centers.

During the 1950s families poured into the cities due to work shortages in the countryside. However, in cities such as Managua there was also too little work, especially for women, and

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<sup>25</sup> Collinson, *Women and Revolution*, 41.



thus began a tide of prostitution. Under Somoza, prostitution was legal and the National Guard often helped to return runaway women to brothel owners. One might surmise that Somoza was profiting from prostitution if his employees in the National Guard were so avid to capture runaway women. In the Sandinista era, prostitution was criminalized and linked to capitalist imperialism. “A war of prejudice, discrimination, a war in which capitalism tries to turn women into trash, buying and selling them like merchandise, like a luxury item or cheap vegetable, depending on the quality of the merchandise.”<sup>27</sup> In attempts to reform prostitution, government agencies acknowledged that societal prejudices needed to be addressed. The pervasive belief that prostitutes were “social lepers” and/or were “necessary to control rape”<sup>28</sup> came under scrutiny. Programs emphasized male socialization rather than blaming prostitutes for their predicament. This was a direct affront to *machismo* prerogatives. Even before the triumph of 1979, the FSLN had proclaimed that a future Sandinista government would “eliminate prostitution and other social disgraces so as to raise women’s dignity.”<sup>29</sup> Indeed, this, along with banning advertisements which degraded women, was one of the first acts of the revolutionary government.<sup>30</sup> However, why was this one of first measures to be implemented after the triumph?

The FSLN, in banning prostitution and the degradation of women’s bodies in advertising, was clearly working against the historical legacy of Somoza, who had exploited these avenues of oppression. Indeed, the FSLN in fighting against some forms of *machismo* concurrently supported other forms of *machismo* through their attempts to regulate women’s bodies, albeit in a different way than that pursued by Somoza. A complex negotiation of gender norms were operating here. By returning to the themes of nationalism, Christianity and *machismo*, one finds some interesting dynamics at work. First, nationalism has, at its core, an imperative to reproduce new members for the nation, which entails the control of women’s sexuality. Thus,

attention must be focused on how different kinds of women and their voices are suppressed, silenced, and channeled in national cultural identity discourse, and how these

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<sup>26</sup> Ibid., 40.

<sup>27</sup> Tomas Borge in Ibid., 69.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid., 72.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid., 69.

<sup>30</sup> See Lancaster, *Life is Hard*, 94.

different women's sexualities and reproductive capacities are specifically controlled as part of nation-building.<sup>31</sup>

Many scholars have noted that constructions of national identity often depend upon the policing of gender roles in people's daily lives.<sup>32</sup> In particular, women's reproductive powers and sexuality are brought under scrutiny in nationalist endeavors, so that the "purity" of national offspring can be maintained.<sup>33</sup> The abolition of prostitution and degrading images serves to combat women's oppression, as it simultaneously works to control the bodies of the nation's women. The FSLN's focus on controlling the dissemination of women's bodies speaks to this phenomenon. Christianity, with its Old Testament heritage of original sin and the ensuing vilification of women's sexuality, also follows the imperative to control women's bodies. Finally, *machismo*, which fetishizes other men's women while protecting the sanctity of one's "own woman," can also be understood as a cultural formation desirous of maintaining strict control over particular women's bodies. The FSLN's intentional incorporation of women's issues is progressive; however, deep-seated cultural practices which impact gender issues were not as profoundly integrated as they might have been. Women's incorporation without full emancipation is a familiar notion to gender scholars,<sup>34</sup> for whom "talking the talk" does not always equal "walking the walk".

The overthrow of the Somoza regime was a long time coming, and with its demise came many profound, positive changes for the populace of Nicaragua. Accolades from the world over poured into Managua commending the FSLN on the real, material advances they were able to foster throughout the nation. The improved status of women, particularly poor women, was something the new government could be proud of, though there remained gaps in a true equality between men and women. The focus here has been to illustrate some of these changes, and at the

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<sup>31</sup> Les Field, *The Grimace of Macho Ratón: Artisans, Identity, and Nation in Late-Twentieth-Century Western Nicaragua* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1999), 124.

<sup>32</sup> See for example, Katherine Verdery, *What was Socialism and What Comes Next?* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996).

<sup>33</sup> See for example, Ana Alonso, "The Politics of Space, Time and Substance: State Formation, Nationalism, and Ethnicity" in *Annual Review of Anthropology* 23 (1994): 379-405; Ann Laura Stoler, *Race and the Education of Desire: Foucault's History of Sexuality and the Colonial Order of Things* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1995); Faye D. Ginsburg and Rayna Rapp, eds., *Conceiving the New World Order: The Global Politics of Reproduction* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995); Maria Mies, et al., eds. *Women: The Last Colony* (London: Zed, 1988); Constance R. Sutton, ed. *Feminism, Nationalism, and Militarism* (Flushing, NY: Association for Feminist Anthropology (American Anthropological Association), 1995).

<sup>34</sup> See Susan K. Besse, *Restructuring Patriarchy: The Modernization of Gender Inequality in Brazil 1914-1940*. (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1996); Maxine Molyneux, "The Politics of Abortion in Nicaragua: Revolutionary Pragmatism—or Feminism in the Realm of Necessity?" *Feminist Review* 29 (1988): 114-32.

same time suggest how they failed to be fully effective. When the Sandinistas marched triumphantly into the streets of Managua in July 1979, they did so on a platform which Hazel Smith has described as one of Marxism, Christianity, and nationalism.<sup>35</sup> She goes on to describe that, “Sandinismo wanted to create a new collectively based on an unselfish society from which would emerge a “new man” and a “new woman”. Certain qualities would be expected from the “new man” who would have particular responsibilities and, like Sandino, these “new men” would be respected nationally and internationally.”<sup>36</sup> In this passage Smith mentions the making of a “new woman,” but in the passages that follow, this “new woman” has disappeared from her discussion. One is led to believe that the “new woman” is some version of the “new man” who, in Smith’s rendering, is equated with Sandino. Lancaster emphasizes that gender roles in Nicaragua must be understood not as oppositional constructs, the man being convex where the woman is concave, but rather as complex, relational articulations of identity. The absence of a full description of what constitutes this “new woman” in Smith’s discussion betrays an endemic absence of a fully developed agenda for women’s rights. Here, one finds the beginning of an erasure in scholarship which may reflect a similar erasure in the revolutionary project itself.

Father Miguel D’Escoto, a priest who served as foreign minister of Nicaragua in the early 1980s, elaborates the “four pillars” of Sandinista thought: nationalism, democracy, Christian values, and social justice. He writes that nationalism will allow Nicaraguans to regain sovereignty<sup>37</sup> with democracy fostering “real participation”.<sup>38</sup> Further, D’Escoto describes how “Christian...evangelical gospel values have permeated down deep”<sup>39</sup> for which he offers an example of Tomas Borge’s words with his torturer. “Remember when I told you I would take revenge when I was free? I now come for my revenge. For your hate and torture I give you love, and for what you did I give you freedom.”<sup>40</sup> Lastly, D’Escoto explains that social justice offers a means to a democratic system for the people. “And by ‘the people’ I mean everyone, not just an elite, but everyone.”<sup>41</sup> Much of what D’Escoto illustrates here are profound, socialist revolutionary ideals. However, what is also reflected is a Christian call for self-abnegation.

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<sup>35</sup> Hazel Smith, *Nicaragua: Self Determination and Survival* (London: Pluto, 1993), 136.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, 139.

<sup>37</sup> Father Miguel D’Escoto, “Nicaragua: Unfinished Canvas,” in *Nicaragua: Unfinished Revolution* ed. John Vandermeer and Peter Rosset. (New York: Grove, 1986), 441.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, 441.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, 442.

<sup>40</sup> Tomas Borge in *Ibid.*, 442.

Borge's demonstration of "turning the other cheek" is a powerful one, and substantiates D'Escoto's claim that "gospel values have permeated down deep". However, the penetration of these tenets suggests a gendered bias at work.

Following D'Escoto's "pillars," one might question whether women in Nicaragua, who have historically practiced self-abnegation, would benefit from this rhetoric; we might ask is there anything "new" here to be offered to the "new woman"? Lancaster suggests that, "the leitmotifs of the [Nicaraguan] feminine ideal might be summarized as caring, nurturing, and self-sacrifice."<sup>42</sup> Clearly, part of women's historic role in Nicaragua has been that of sacrifice. Self-abnegation in the case of women seems more "traditional" than revolutionary. A second question would be whether a nascent gay and lesbian rights movement would benefit from "turning the other cheek"? In other historical circumstances, the silence borne from "turning the other cheek" has often limited attempts at building gay and lesbian rights. Ignoring persecution has often ended in "closeted" identities, if not brutal attacks. Indeed, various forms of Christianity, whose "values" are "down deep" on this issue, have been guilty of virulent attacks on homosexuals throughout history.<sup>43</sup> My intention here is not to discredit the many substantive changes the revolution was able to implement, but rather, to point to the ideological foundations which may have hampered an even more wide-ranging social justice. Suffice it to say that Sandinista doctrine, while certainly liberating for many, may not have been the best for articulating the full human rights of women and gays and lesbians.

The agenda of the FSLN can be summarized as one which sought to redress economically- based social inequalities, believing that other forms of oppression based on gender, race, ethnicity, etc would also ultimately be resolved. This stance is summarized in the following.

The solution to the specific problems of women, i.e. the struggle against discriminatory political ideas and the development of socioeconomic conditions to assure women an effective equality of opportunity, are not issues having to do exclusively with women but with all of society... We reject tendencies that promote the emancipation of women as the outcome of a struggle against men, or as an activity exclusively of women, for this type of

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<sup>41</sup> Ibid., 442.

<sup>42</sup> Lancaster, *Life is Hard*, 93.

<sup>43</sup> I am thinking here of current day conservative right wing religious movements whose rallying cry in the name of "family values" has served to un-do and/or prevent gays and lesbians from exercising their full human rights. In a more distant past, the Inquisition certainly meant the persecution and death of many homosexuals, as well as women. However, some scholars have suggested that the Church, especially in early Christian times, provided periods of tolerance for sexual minorities.

position is divisive and distracts the people from their fundamental tasks. It is the work of the FSLN and all revolutionaries, of all the advanced sectors of society, men and women together, to lead the ideological, political and socioeconomic battles that will result in the elimination of all forms of oppression and discrimination in Nicaragua, including those which women endure.<sup>44</sup>

Under Sandinismo women and other subaltern groups were offered the opportunity to become political subjects. Margaret Randall elaborates that, “[t]he Sandinista Revolution brought young women, with their Spanish Catholic heritage of chastity and submission, out into the arena of public struggle. A decade of revolutionary government promoted women’s rights in health, education, labor, leadership, and more egalitarian legislation—some of it successful, some not.”<sup>45</sup> However, it must be recalled that “the FSLN retained control over AMNLAE (Asociación de Mujeres Nicaragüenses, Luisa Amanda Espinosa) and the women of AMNLAE proved incapable of cutting the cord that prevented autonomy.”<sup>46</sup> AMNLAE, the FSLN’s solution to the familiar “woman question” of orthodox Marxism, was very much a part of FSLN ideology. As such, AMNLAE offered some avenues of liberation as it foreclosed others. The ideological platform of the FSLN opened many doors to women, while it maintained strict control over any intervening feminist forms. While there was some deviation from a class-based agenda and some incorporation of mainstream feminist values, the FSLN restricted identification with its agenda on “the woman question” with “feminism”. Given the long history of imperialist interventions from the North, it is not surprising that the FSLN would have some trepidation about “feminism(s)” which have sometimes served as another form of “imperialist discourse” in various international settings. Because of this, those who tried to organize women outside of AMNLAE’s agenda were often criticized for adopting ideologies of social change, such as feminism, which lay outside of the nationalist project envisioned by the FSLN. In spite of these shortcomings however, Randall concludes, ultimately, that, “it would be incorrect to underestimate the liberating effect that Sandinismo has had upon generations of women.”<sup>47</sup> While I agree with Randall’s assessment, I also recognize that the vision of FSLN ideology was fundamentally limited in its inability to embrace potentially useful addresses to women’s

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<sup>44</sup> *Dirección Nacional* of the FSLN in Field, *The Grimace of Macho Raton*, 127.

<sup>45</sup> Margaret Randall, *Sandinista's Daughters Revisited: Feminism in Nicaragua* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1994), 34.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, 34.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, 34.

oppression in Nicaragua. Ironically, this limited vision, and restrictions to outside organizing, ultimately fostered a whole new realm of organizing around the rights of women and gays and lesbians.

### **shaping gay movements through feminism**

Somoza's regime was notorious for its co-optation and/or destruction of organized movements. The effect was a literal stunting of civil society. As the Somoza regime became more repressive and invaded personal spheres by disappearing, torturing and killing its opponents a multiplicity of sectors became involved, including many women who became soldiers, weapons makers, and supplied logistical support.<sup>48</sup> With their victory, the Sandinistas intentionally incorporated the disenfranchised and offered them a place in the political process. The effect of liberation was profound. This paper has offered women's incorporation into a national political process as a frame for understanding how future "identity-based" movements would develop in Nicaragua. The particular focus below will be to examine how feminism informed nascent gay and lesbian rights movements, and how this development was informed by the ideological underpinnings of the Sandinista regime.

Millie Thayer credits the Sandinista government with providing a climate of political possibilities which offered "Nicaraguan lesbians, as well as gays...if not social acceptance, at least greater room for maneuver."<sup>49</sup> Because the FSLN had advocated for women's rights, lesbians began to dream of similar rights they might enjoy. However, while the FSLN was very "out of the closet" about the need to address women's rights, the same sentiment was not applied to gay and lesbian rights. Gay nightclubs, which flourished under the Somoza regime, were summarily closed. In 1986, a clandestine group of gays and lesbians calling themselves the "Nicaraguan Gay Movement" began meeting in order to offer each other emotional support and education regarding sexuality and AIDS. However, after only a few months, the organization was infiltrated by Sandinista State Security. Members were rounded up, questioned, and told their gatherings were "counterrevolutionary," even though most participants had been devoted activists within the revolution. Despite this blow to the nascent movement, gays and lesbians

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<sup>48</sup> Millie Thayer, "Identity, Revolution and Democracy: Lesbian Movements in Central America," *Social Problems* 44 no. 3 (1997): 386-406.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, 399.

continued to find one another. The contradictory behavior of the state toward gays and lesbians is perhaps best summarized in the events of 1986-1987.

In response to the potential AIDS epidemic,<sup>50</sup> lesbians organized in solidarity with gay men in order to disseminate information about the spread of AIDS.<sup>51</sup> Safe sex education often spawned “coming out” sessions as this informal group of lesbians and gay men found further points of commonality. Meanwhile, the Ministry of Health (MINSA) set up an AIDS prevention program which mobilized gay men using methods of community based preventative care. Health Minister Dora María Téllez invited the Managua-based informal discussion group to meet with MINSA in order to set up a new sex education project together. Health brigadistas from San Francisco, California joined in the grassroots work which brought AIDS education to both gay and non-gay community members. The specter of AIDS ushered in a new age of cooperation between the Sandinistas and nascent gay and lesbian rights movements. The government and community response to the potential of AIDS is remarkable, especially when compared to the US where many thousands died before any concerted effort was made by the government to establish effective outreach.<sup>52</sup> The coalition project, CEP-SIDA (Collective of Popular Educators Concerned with HIV/AIDS), formed in 1988<sup>53</sup> and recruited 200 people to conduct community outreach, but only after Téllez convinced the revolutionary government that outreach workers should not be harassed.<sup>54</sup>

AIDS organizing, in this case, provided a catalyst and a cover for gay and lesbian organizing. The government’s intrusions into organizations such as the Nicaragua Gay Movement, were far from exemplary, and the “official” stance of the party was one which was not “tolerant”. The issue of lesbian liberation had never been included in Sandinista strategy. Indeed, there is a glaring lack of concern for issues of sexual orientation while all other aspects of social life seem to have been politicized. Sex education documents published by AMNLAE spoke only to heterosexual intercourse and birth control. A pervasive fear in the Nicaraguan

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<sup>50</sup> There were no known cases of AIDS in Nicaragua at this time. However, by January 1989, 3 deaths and 16 cases of HIV had been reported.

<sup>51</sup> A further line of inquiry, which is beyond the scope of this paper, would be to address the often problematic focus on gay male issues within gay and lesbian organizing. For many feminists, an emphasis on men’s issues as sexual minorities serves to overshadow the experience of lesbians.

<sup>52</sup> See for example, Urvashi Vaid, *Virtual Equality: The Mainstreaming of Gay and Lesbian Liberation* (New York: Anchor, 1995).

<sup>53</sup> María Bolt González, “Nicaragua” in *Unspoken Rules: Sexual Orientation and Women's Human Rights* ed. Rachel Rosenbloom, (San Francisco: International Gay and Lesbian Human Rights Commission, 1995), 129.

women's movement, as in the US, was that an association with lesbians would lessen the credibility of the organization. An editorial in *El Nuevo Diario* (January 1987) unveiled this fear in un-minced words. "You claim to be intelligent, conscious and revolutionary. When will you stop imitating this lesbian song of European women and let the voice of Nicaraguan women be heard?"<sup>55</sup> While AIDS organizing appears to have embraced information and *brigadistas* from the North, there clearly remained an anti-imperialist sentiment around issues of sexuality. Again, the refrain is the protection of women's sexuality, not from men in this case, but from the contamination of Euro-American sexual libertinage. In addition to being associated with imperialism, lesbianism is configured as counter-revolutionary: lesbian sex does not produce children for the revolutionary nation-state; lesbianism does not involve men and thus does not collude with discourses of "the people;" lesbian 'identity,' as a non-class based interest, is untenable. However, despite discourses of rejection, women began organizing around lesbian identity. While the revolutionary government did not embrace these identity movements, it also did not practice heavy-handed persecution as had been the case in Cuba.<sup>56</sup> Returning to Margaret Randall's sentiment, the revolution, combined with other factors, does seem to have had a liberating effect overall on the potential for lesbian organizing.

The attitude expressed in the above editorial, alongside the trespasses of Sandinista State Security into gay organizing efforts, highlights the controversial nature of lesbianism within Sandinista politics. Given these sentiments, it might seem obvious that there was a general rejection of lesbian organizing efforts. However, the narrative of one North American lesbian feminist who worked with various organizations in Nicaragua in 1985, tells a different story.

I was "out". I could walk around the streets holding hands with either North American or Nicaraguan women without people thinking anything of it...I think some people just saw

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<sup>54</sup> Rita Arauz in Randall, *Sandino's Daughters Revisited*, 274-75.

<sup>55</sup> Quoted in Collinson, *Women and Revolution*, 23.

<sup>56</sup> Cuba purged homosexuals in the mid 1960s on the grounds that their sexuality was a symptom of bourgeois decadence (Young in Collinson, *Women and Revolution*, 24). Further, early AIDS policy in Cuba mandated that those infected by the HIV virus be quarantined. While policies of homosexual exclusion and persecution in revolutionary Cuba have been widely critiqued, particularly by North American gay activists, recent work suggests a different perspective. Ian Lumsden suggests in *Machos, Maricones, and Gays: Cuba and Homosexuality* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1996) that Cuban policies toward homosexuals be considered in the historical context of colonialism and US hemispheric domination. Through an historical analysis dating back to the 16<sup>th</sup> century, Lumsden concludes that the potential for gay liberation in Cuba must be understood within the context of Cuba's economic marginality (especially after the collapse of the Soviet Union and a continuing US trade embargo) and that "the issue of homosexual oppression, however unacceptable it may be in principle, must be viewed in a broad political and historical context" (xxi). While Sandinista Nicaragua, in contrast, had no official policies of homosexual repression, I agree with Lumsden that issues of sexuality must be considered in their historical context. Moreover, in revolutionary projects such as those of Cuba and Nicaragua, careful consideration must be given to the liberal individual notions of sexuality which become especially problematic in situations of national, communitarian reforms.



it as a sign of female affection. But I think others recognized it as a lesbian thing and didn't seem to think anything of it...It was just very comfortable...whether they were lesbian or heterosexual. I think there were some lesbians and gay men who felt pretty comfortable with their identity and some who really struggled a fair bit, with it. I met a few lesbians who were in their teenage years or early twenties, and some gay men...some of them struggled with self-acceptance, and some of them felt it was really a struggle in society. There was lots of speculation [about high-up party members]. Even those people who were not interested in feminism or lesbian rights, seemed to be O.K. with the fact that there were some lesbians and gay men in the party.<sup>57</sup>

While this respondent notes that not all gay people were comfortable being “out” about their sexuality, she also notes that many were. As an “out” lesbian she seems to have enjoyed a more accepting environment than she might have in many areas of the US. However, as a North American woman, her privileged status no doubt had an impact on how much sexual freedom she was able to express. Certainly, her sexual identity, that “lesbian song” from the North was interpreted differently by people based on her “outsider” status. However, what is perhaps most interesting in her narrative is the statement that people were very interested in learning about North American feminism and lesbian movements.

In general, the more either men or women were involved with the [revolutionary] movement, then in general the more open they were about feminism and lesbian and gay rights. [They were] very much talking about it as all being a piece, that it was essential to integrate [gay and feminist concerns] into the movement. That was the perspective I got from the community level people who were involved with the Sandinistas...they were very actively supportive of feminism and gay rights...I know that [the disassociation of feminism with lesbian issues] existed. But there was a whole continuum of associating feminist ideology with lesbian rights...Young women, as a whole were probably more accepting of feminism and lesbian rights. People were very eager to know about feminism and lesbian rights in the United States and elsewhere, as a way of expanding their horizons...to learn ways of bringing that into Nicaragua in their own context, in their own ways.<sup>58</sup>

Though “official” discourses may not have actively supported the formation of lesbian rights movements, the above narrative speaks to a range of opinions amongst the populace as perceived by a North American woman. Here, lesbian concerns and feminist concerns become an integrated set of issues, at least amongst the people with whom this woman was in contact. She suggests that differences in age often revealed differing opinions on the subjects of feminism

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<sup>57</sup> Telephone interview conducted by A. Cymene Howe with ‘V’. November 30, 1998, Albuquerque, NM.

and lesbianism. She also suggests that those who were involved with the revolution tended to have more positive attitudes about each of these issues. Rather than figuring issues of feminism and sexuality as imperialist impositions, the people she spoke with seem to have had a genuine interest in gleaning information about the successes and failures of US movements. While this exemplifies a legitimate concern about US influence in determining the direction of Latin American development, it also highlights the complexity of ideological interchanges. This woman's narrative lends new evidence to the sense that reproductive rights and issues of sexual identity in the Nicaraguan context stemmed in part from interchanges with the international, especially the US, feminist community.<sup>59</sup> However, "it would be a mistake to say that [US and European feminist materials] planted the seeds of women's consciousness in Nicaragua or to imply that Nicaraguan women learned their feminism from abroad. These ideas took root in fertile soil."<sup>60</sup> These were interchanges, not impositions. While the impact of outside influence is contestable and context dependent, this respondent's impressions do serve to elaborate the variety of perspectives which were extant at the time. Certainly, it is vital to remember Clifford Geertz's anthropological adage that people often tell you what they think you want to hear.<sup>61</sup> Perhaps knowing the lesbian feminist orientation of this woman inspired people to emphasize an interest in lesbian and feminist issues which was not, in actuality, widely held. Nonetheless, the impressions reflected here suggest that on-the-ground sentiments do not necessarily collude with official political doctrine. Her impressions also dovetail with prominent scholars' assessment of the situation. At the very least, her words foreshadow the development of lesbian and feminist organizing over the years following her 1985 visit.

The relationship between feminism and lesbianism has, in many historical settings, been problematic.<sup>62</sup> As evidenced by the official position of AMNLAE, there is often an uneasiness with incorporating lesbian issues into feminist agendas, usually out of fear that the feminist project will be somehow sullied by an association with non-normative sexuality. On the other

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<sup>58</sup> Ibid.

<sup>59</sup> Randall, *Sandino's Daughters Revisited*, 34-37.

<sup>60</sup> Ibid., 6.

<sup>61</sup> Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures*. New York: Basic Books (1973).

<sup>62</sup> See Shane Phelan, *Identity Politics: Lesbian Feminism and the Limits of Community* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1989) for a discussion of the difficulties between the dominant US Women's Movement and gay rights groups as ideals of liberal individualism and communitarian ideals of solidarity come into conflict. Phelan's case study considers lesbian sadomasochism as a potentially "un-feminist" stance. Her larger argument draws upon the tensions between these two (often competing) models in the struggle to implement broad social change.

hand, feminism has been enriched by the participation of lesbians, and the interests of both women and lesbians often coincide. In October 1987 the first *Latin American Lesbian Gathering* was held in Mexico; it was an offshoot of the annual *Latin American Feminist Conference* which had been ongoing since 1978. Five Nicaraguan women attended the *Lesbian Gathering* which facilitated their making contact with lesbian movements on their own continent. Attendance at the conference and the “out” sexuality of the attendees concretized the introduction of lesbian issues into Nicaraguan politics for the first time. The following year, AMNLAE’s General Secretary, Lea Guido, was asked about the inclusion of lesbian sex in AMNLAE’s sex education materials. She explained that “lesbians march under their own banner”.<sup>63</sup> She went on to express that the lesbian struggle was not identical with women’s struggle in general, though she conceded that “I’m sure there will be a space for lesbians too, for everybody”.<sup>64</sup> This offering of at least minimal inclusion was a radical departure from the previous position of AMNLAE. In September 1988 President Daniel Ortega made an equally important statement on the issue. At Managua’s *Women and Law Conference* Ortega was asked by a Costa Rican delegate whether a policy of discrimination or denial of homosexuals’ human rights was practiced in Nicaragua, to which he replied, “no”. While the statements by Guido and Ortega can hardly be considered enthusiastic endorsements of gay inclusion, they do reflect a shift in the official rhetoric. Though not a whole-hearted embrace of identity-based issues, these examples offer the tenuous beginnings of a dialogue between lesbian organizing and the revolutionary project. Again, one is reminded that revolutionary ideology both opened and foreclosed possibilities for identity-based movements. The revolution allowed more “room for maneuver” for lesbians. However, ironically, the demise of FSLN political hegemony inspired even more possibilities.

The 1990 electoral defeat of the Sandinistas signaled a return to a more conservative political regime. The electoral defeat also served to invigorate the organizing efforts of feminists and lesbians and gays. The electoral campaign of the FSLN was widely understood as a sexist one, perhaps most famously in its veneration of Ortega’s *machismo* and “rooster-like” identity. The campaign mirrored many of the fundamental tenets of Sandinista ideology such as nationalism and an embedded *machismo*. The campaign itself can indeed be read as mirroring the aspects of Sandinismo which had served to impede the full implementation of feminist and

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<sup>63</sup> Quoted in Collinson, *Women and Revolution*, 25.

lesbian agendas. While the electoral fray of 1990 stands as a symbol for all that had not been addressed in terms of feminist and lesbian concerns, the growth of identity-based movements post-1990 impinged on three, more concrete, axes. First, women who had devoted their time and energies to Sandinista efforts were now freed from party responsibilities. They were also freed from strict adherence to Sandinista ideology, and thus able to expand the scope of their theorizing and political concerns. Undoubtedly, their experience with Sandinista organizing informed their approaches to effecting social change, while at the same time their being freed from Sandinista doctrine allowed for the development of new strategies. Secondly, the onus of the incoming regime provoked coalition-building efforts to stave off repressive policies. Having a discernible “enemy” to struggle against compelled a new wave of organizing. Finally, as Contra aggression subsided, resources, both material and intellectual, were freed up for potential use in other areas of social organizing.

Many feminists who had held important positions of power in the FSLN had become progressively disenchanted with AMNLAE as it “ultimately did more to rally women around the revolution than to make women’s issues a revolutionary priority.”<sup>65</sup> These women met in independent study groups like the Partido de la Izquierda Erótica (PIE) and grappled with the nature of women’s disempowerment, reproduction, and lesbian and gay rights. Through discerning what Maxine Molyneux has called “strategic gender interests,”<sup>66</sup> these politically independent women’s groups were able to take up the larger social phenomenon of gender subordination in its various machinations. Areas of concern, such as lesbian rights which the Sandinistas’ had refused to address were examined, often utilizing European and US feminist theory.<sup>67</sup> Prominent women such as Gioconda Belli, Milu Vargas and Sofia Montenegro, took up issues of land reform, domestic labor and the division of labor in light of feminist theorizing. Nicaraguan feminist writers and poets gained influence and prestige in global feminist circles. Feminist critiques of the Sandinista era began to appear and new discourses regarding health care, control over bodies and sexuality, legal and social protection have grown.<sup>68</sup> Independent

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<sup>64</sup> Ibid., 25.

<sup>65</sup> Margaret Randall, “To Change Our Own Reality and the World: A Conversation with Lesbians in Nicaragua,” *Signs* 18 no. 4 (1993): 909.

<sup>66</sup> Maxine Molyneux, “Mobilization Without Emancipation? Women’s Interests, the State, and Revolution in Nicaragua,” *Feminist Studies* 11 no. 2 (1985): 227-54.

<sup>67</sup> Randall, *Sandino’s Daughters Revisited*.

<sup>68</sup> Ibid.

organizations with socialist-feminist understandings have expanded since 1990. Women involved in socialist-feminism furthered their analysis of gender as a system which is created and reproduced. Notions of “masculine” and “feminine” roles were now assessed in detail and tied to nationalist projects. In order to understand the pervasiveness of gender subordination questions related to,

how...masculine and feminine, man and woman, come to ‘embody’ the logics of the ‘national’ in the shifting practices and ideas about the norms of domesticity? How have the subordinated ‘subnationals’ operating on the same terrains of various states confronted, contested, or assimilated these logics in diverse efforts to construct gendered selves?<sup>69</sup>

As feminist activists among the Sandinistas were freed both ideologically and pragmatically from adherence to FSLN goals, a new wave of feminist and lesbian concerns came to the fore.

Concurrently, “repressive legislation roll[ed] back many of the last decade’s gains, [making] women...the single most vibrant and active political force.”<sup>70</sup> This shift provoked organizations to address the potential repression of the new conservative UNO regime. They were wise to anticipate an influx of conservative ideology, since the internally divided state indeed negotiated a neoliberal economic plan, and a conservative gender agenda was quick in the making. Dora María Téllez summarizes.

On the one hand, feminist movements everywhere are gaining in strength. In Nicaragua, the fact that there’s been a depolarization, politically speaking, has also opened up a space for this sort of struggle. And I think there’s something else, which may be the most interesting reason of all: this government [UNO] and the political Right in general have pushed a very conservative line on women.”<sup>71</sup>

Indeed, the new government quickly instituted a curriculum of “Morality and Civics” in their revamped version of school textbooks. Anti-abortion campaigns blossomed, fostered by both Christian conservatism and nationalist rhetoric. Attempts to criminalize domestic violence were defeated. Finally, in 1990 Managua’s incoming mayor Arnoldo Alemán launched a campaign to “clean up the streets” and eliminate homosexual activity from public spaces. Only one month after he took office, Alemán closed the abandoned cathedral which had served as a gathering place for gay men and harassment escalated in a nearby park known to be frequented by gay men.

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<sup>69</sup> Brackette Williams, *Women out of Place the Gender of Agency and the Race of Nationality* (New York: Routledge, 1996):4.

<sup>70</sup> Randall, *To Change Our Own Reality*, 909.

This reflects only a partial rendering of the litany of conservative measures which were undertaken at the beginning of the 1990's. The freedoms which the FSLN had fostered during their tenure were eroding at a quick pace, a fact which compelled many activists to respond with increased political virulence. The combination of impending conservative measures and a new intellectual/political freedom served to motivate many. During this era, feminist projects began to overtly coincide with the struggle for gay and lesbian rights. The marriage of feminism and gay rights is a critical one. However, other factors also informed the proliferation and coalitions of identity-based movements in Nicaragua.

The particular form of organizing of identity-based movements reflects the historical and ideological contexts out of which they are born. Millie Thayer has delineated what she considers the three factors which account for different movements' distinct formulations. She explains that collective identities are dependent on an economic model/structure of development, state-civil society relations, and the broader field of social movements.<sup>72</sup> By the late 1980s, lesbian rights organizations, influenced by international gay and lesbian movements, the onset of AIDS, and structural changes in society arose across Central America. By the early 1990's Nicaragua, Honduras, Costa Rica, and El Salvador all claimed significant lesbian rights coalitions. However, Thayer points out that these identity-based movements, while geographically close, were strategically distant. She characterizes the lesbian movement in Costa Rica as one which focused on inward identity, spirituality, and woman-centered culture aimed at forming a lesbian community. In contrast, Nicaraguan lesbians took a decidedly public stance to advocate for a society free of prejudice. The socialist aspirations and accomplishments of the FSLN clearly shaped the goals of identity-based movements, advocating broad social equality rather than an individuated set of personal rights. Thus identity-based concerns and socialist values dovetail in this example. Representing two poles of a spectrum, Costa Rican and Nicaraguan lesbians sought different ends to their projects, the former focusing on strengthening extant networks, the latter attempting to revolutionize "how society conceives of sexuality."<sup>73</sup> In Nicaragua, two

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<sup>71</sup> Dora María Téllez in Randall, *Sandino's Daughters Revisited*, 259.

<sup>72</sup> Thayer, *Identity, Revolution and Democracy*, 386.

<sup>73</sup> *Ibid.*, 387.

decades of an “uneven” relationship between the state and civil society generated activists with an affinity for “an inclusive form of social integration as a model.”<sup>74</sup>

In the late 1980s and early 1990s two organizations, *Nosotras* and *Xochiquetzal* were especially active in organizing for lesbian rights. Each organization, though distinct, had overlapping goals which can be considered complementary parts of a single movement. *Xochiquetzal*'s membership was more middle class than that of *Nosotras*, but all members were (or had been) Sandinista supporters. Mirroring the differences between Costa Rican and Nicaraguan organizing tactics, *Nosotras* focused on internal identity while *Xochiquetzal* conducted outreach beyond the lesbian community. Both groups offered courses on feminism, sexuality, and women's health issues while providing training and logistical support for other lesbian and gay groups. Each organization generated support for a growing feminist movement and actively challenged homophobia in feminist settings; this was vital given past experiences with AMNLAE. Putting into action the feminist mantra, “the personal is political,” each organization set, as its final goal, a heightened acceptance of lesbian identity in the broader social arena. Thus “organized lesbians in Nicaragua went beyond defending their existence as individual members of a sexual minority.”<sup>75</sup> The sub-director of *Xochiquetzal* explained that,

We realized that if we wanted to influence the population and promote respect and tolerance for sexual preference, we couldn't do it by staying in the ghetto. [Also], gays and lesbians are not only those who are organized, but they are in all sectors; the majority are in the closet. So we broadened the groups we worked with.<sup>76</sup>

Each organization conducted workshops and radio programs. They published articles and educational materials with outreach focused on women's groups, students and medical personnel. The overarching goals of these non-governmental organizations were to demystify sexuality in all sectors while developing values of self-esteem and understanding. Certainly, Nicaragua's less developed economy and small middle class impacted the formation of gay and lesbian rights movements. In Costa Rica, gay “ghettos” sprang up in San José, while in Nicaragua economic limitations necessitated that gays and lesbians remain with their families of origin.<sup>77</sup> The

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<sup>74</sup> Ibid., 390.

<sup>75</sup> Ibid., 393.

<sup>76</sup> Ibid., 394.

<sup>77</sup> This phenomenon is akin to the situation of gays and lesbians in the US prior to World War II. See for example, Stephen O. Murray, “The 'Underdevelopment' of Modern Gay Homosexuality in Meso America,” *Modern Homosexualities: Fragments of Lesbian and Gay Experiences* ed. Ken Plummer (London: Routledge, 1992).

endemic poverty in Nicaragua also meant that lesbian rights movements would be compelled to address issues of class alongside issues of sexuality, a perspective which was taken up particularly by *Nosotras*. The cross-class organizing which had taken place during the revolution seems to have informed coalition building in the lesbian movement. Lastly, *internacionalistas*,<sup>78</sup> who had been drawn by revolutionary intrigue, continued to lend their efforts to organizing around issues of sexuality. In total, the particular form of gay and lesbian rights organizing in the early 1990s was explicitly informed by the historical and social circumstances of the time. The infusion of feminist thinking, contributions from global gay activists,<sup>79</sup> and a socialist revolutionary sensibility which had developed over the years of Sandinista activism and rule, all impacted the shape of identity movements based on sexuality. At the same time, identity-based movements made a clear departure from the tropes of strict Sandinismo which had formulated its basic tenets out of nationalism, anti-imperialism, and a kind of watered-down *machismo*. A complex of factors went into the making of gay and lesbian human rights movements. A complex of efforts would be rallied to struggle against the conservative backlash which became more virulent in the ensuing years.

Before the early 1990s very few Nicaraguan lesbians considered their sexuality as a political issue.<sup>80</sup> However, with the sea changes taking place politically and socially in the Republic, a more adamant “out” lesbian population began to make their voices heard alongside those of feminists. In January 1992, 800 women gathered in Managua to convene a national forum on women’s problems and issues under a patriarchal regime. Their resolutions included: making violence against women a criminal offense; establishing networks to resolve problems rather than working under an “umbrella organization”; commemorating International Women’s Day; celebrating International Gay and Lesbian Day; and organizing a network of women journalists to set up a radio station dedicated to women’s issues.<sup>81</sup> An organizer attributed this

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<sup>78</sup> “Internacionalistas” generally came from the US and Europe and advocated a progressive political agenda and solidarity with the Sandinista Revolution. They were often actively concerned with political, cultural, and social situations in Nicaragua.

<sup>79</sup> Because the focus of this discussion is on the formation of gay and lesbian rights movements in Nicaragua specifically, I have only nodded to significant correspondences in the global setting (such as Costa Rica and the US). However, it is vital to point out that this epoch saw the burgeoning of ‘queer’ and lesbian and gay rights movements in many corners of the globe. While it is outside the scope of this paper to discuss the full impact of global sexuality organizing efforts within Nicaragua, I would cite the heated discussions of sexuality issues during the proceedings of the 4<sup>th</sup> United Nations Conference on the Status of Women (Beijing 1995) as evidence that lesbian and gay human rights issues were gaining prominence on a world scale.

<sup>80</sup> Collinson, *Women and Revolution*, 24.

<sup>81</sup> Agence France-Presse, “Nicaragua: Forum on Women's Issues,” cited from <http://ladb.unm.edu/cgibin/SFgate?conv...fprojects%252farchive%252fpub17315>. Accessed: October 12, 1998.



outpouring of activism to the growth of “women’s consciousness” in Nicaragua.<sup>82</sup> The unification of feminist and gay and lesbian concerns here is quite apparent. However, despite this clear show of support for feminist and gay and lesbian issues, the new regime continued to enact repressive measures at the legislative level. In early 1992, the coalition UNO government presented a package of reforms aimed at addressing “family values.” Perhaps the most pernicious of these measures was article 204, a reform to the penal code which mandated that, “anyone who induces, promotes, propagandizes or practices in scandalous form sexual intercourse between persons of the same sex commits the crime of sodomy<sup>83</sup> and shall incur one to three years imprisonment.”<sup>84</sup> If a person is in a position of power over the other, they will be sentenced to two to four years in prison for “unlawful seduction.”<sup>85</sup>

Popular reaction to the reform was varied. In a radio interview at KUNM, lesbian feminist Hazel Fonseca shared her observations of the reaction to article 204. She claimed that Cardinal Obando y Bravo of the Catholic Church hierarchy invited Nicaraguan Catholics to support the legislation “because in his judgment homosexual relations are abominable and horrific.” Fonseca went on to suggest that,

The lesbian and homosexual collectives have rejected Article 205<sup>86</sup> as unconstitutional and a violation of our human and civil rights...the Nicaraguan Constitution protects all citizens from discrimination or persecution based on race, ideology, religion or sex and this latter point includes sexual preference...the ambiguous language of the article could be used against two same-sex people living together, were this deemed ‘scandalous’ or to persecute journalists writing about homosexuals said to be ‘promoting’ homosexuality...the public does not support Article 205...it threatens everyone’s right to keep the government out of the bedroom.<sup>87</sup>

The UNO-supported reforms were unanimously rejected by Sandinista delegates. Activists initiated a campaign of educational outreach on sexuality and sexual preference issues, produced flyers and collected 4,000 signatures to support presidential veto.<sup>88</sup> International support to fight

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<sup>82</sup> Teresa Blandon in Ibid.

<sup>83</sup> “Sodomy” as a discursive construct as well as an act, has an extensive history. See for example, Michel Foucault *The History of Sexuality, Vol. I* (New York: Vintage, 1978), 101-2.

<sup>84</sup> González, *Nicaragua*, 127.

<sup>85</sup> Panama, “Nicaragua: Controversial Reforms to Penal Code Ratified by President” cited from: <http://ladb.unm.edu/cgi-bin/SFgate?conv...fprojects%252farchive%252fpub17315>. Accessed: October 12, 1998.

<sup>86</sup> In the transcript of this radio interview, article 204 is referred to as article 205. This may have been a transcriber’s mistake, or perhaps there was a misunderstanding as to the correct number of the article. It is in fact 204.

<sup>87</sup> Fonseca, *Interview with Nicaraguan Feminist Leader*.

<sup>88</sup> Gonzalez, *Nicaragua*, 128.

the legislation was rallied, and organizations such as Amnesty International and the International Gay and Lesbian Human Rights Coalition (IGLHRC) actively opposed the legislation. An IGLHRC spokesperson relayed that, “while other countries are making progress on human rights issues, the Nicaraguan government is moving backwards by making homosexual relations illegal...[this is] Latin America’s most repressive anti-sodomy legislation.”<sup>89</sup> In response to this regression, the Nicaraguan Lesbian and Gay Pride Committee, along with 25 other organizations, planned a series of events to campaign for a “Sexuality Free of Prejudice”. People of all sexual orientations spoke at rallies in protest of the reforms, in an unprecedented display of coalition politics. However, on July 8, 1992, President Violeta Chamorro ratified the series of reforms. The Comisión en Pro del Orgullo Lésbico-Homosexual (Lesbian-Gay Pride Commission) produced an analysis of Article 204 and presented it to the Assembly which did not respond. Attempts to overturn the article as unconstitutional were made, but in March 1994 an appeal made to the Supreme Court was denied.<sup>90</sup>

The struggle to establish the human rights of gays and lesbians has been, in the words of Sandinismo, an arduous “path”. It is a struggle which continues; a struggle which is intimately informed by the ideology of Sandinista politics. In order to understand how these movements arose, it is vital to assess the social, political and economic contexts which provided the soil for their growth. Just as Sandinismo was informed by a legacy of economic and military imperialism and dictatorship, so too were identity-based movements shaped by their relationship to these factors and Sandinismo itself. The revolution was crafted from specific material and ideological conditions, so too have identity-based movements been crafted from specific conditions. The course of this discussion has followed some of the factors which went into the making of movements, from colonial era devastations, to peasant revolutionaries, from Northern imperialisms, to the Frente Sandinista, from a revolutionary government to a backlash regime. All the while, I have kept an eye to elucidating the tropes which underlie these historical formations, such as nationalism, anti-imperialism, and *machismo*. While identity-based

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<sup>89</sup> Quoted in Panama, *Nicaragua: Controversial Reforms*.

<sup>90</sup> While activists were unable to overturn the decision, the legality of article 204 may yet be contested. A similar sodomy law in Australia was assessed by the UN Human Rights Committee (1994) as violating privacy and the non-discrimination provision of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR). This ruling is expected to have a wide ranging effect and similar protections are offered under the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. See James D. Willets, “Using International Law to Vindicate the Civil Rights of Gays and Lesbians in United States Courts” *Columbia Human Rights Law Review* 27 no. 1 (1995): 33-56.

movements needed to reckon their own approaches to cultural themes, they also gleaned lessons from revolutionary efforts which had gone before theirs. Throughout this discussion, I have attempted to underscore how lesbian rights movements both diverged from, and converged with, the ideological legacy of the Sandinistas. However, at some point a neat summary of similarities and discordances ceases to be useful for envisioning the very unique historical settings and political agendas of each revolutionary effort. Perhaps Margaret Randall's concession is the most appropriate here. "Sandinism clearly opened a space for diverse freedoms even when it did not succeed in fully taking up their causes."<sup>91</sup>

### **epilogue and icons**

In January 1995 top officials made a mass exodus from the Sandinista Party. Several longtime members resigned, including Fernando Obando Cardenal and the leader of the "reformist" current, Sergio Ramírez. Their reasons for leaving were multiple. However, they were instigated by a radio program aired by the FSLN-owned radio station *Radio Ya*, wherein Dora María Téllez of the National Directorate and Sergio Ramírez' daughter, María Ramírez, were "accused" of being involved in a lesbian relationship.<sup>92</sup> Ramírez said, "I publicly and irrevocably resign from the FSLN. The Sandinista Front that I joined 20 years ago no longer exists...[they now practice] moral terrorism." Téllez commented that she could no longer "sit down with people who have no ethical or moral standards."<sup>93</sup> While Téllez did not resign from the Sandinista Party entirely, she did resign her position within the National Directorate, which many would consider an equally significant statement of discontent. Clearly the imagined threat of a "lesbian song" continues to exist. Perhaps it is time for lesbian rights organizations to artfully construct their own mythical icon, one who is a woman and a lesbian. Given her impeccable revolutionary record, articulate assessments, years of militancy, and work to initiate the first coalition project between the FSLN and gays and lesbians, I would nominate Dora María Téllez. She is after all, now a free woman.

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<sup>91</sup> Randall, *To Change Our Own Reality*, 910.

<sup>92</sup> Agence France-Presse, "Nicaragua: Resignations Exacerbate Crisis in the Frente Sandinista de Liberacion Nacional" cited from: <http://ladb.unm.edu/cgi-bin/SFgate?conv...fprojects%252farchive%252fpub17315> (1995). Accessed: October 12, 1998.

<sup>93</sup> Téllez did not resign from the Sandinista Party entirely, but did resign her position within the National Directorate, which many would consider an equally significant statement of discontent.

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